

The Role of Faith-Based Organisations in the Provision of Services for Homeless People: Summary of Key Findings

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Research Report

The Role of Faith-Based Organisations in the Provision of Services for Homeless People

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Sarah Johnsen
with
Suzanne Fitzpatrick



Centre for
Housing Policy

THE UNIVERSITY *of York*

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Key Points

This study examined the role of Faith-based Organisations (FBOs) in homelessness provision, reflecting on the 'difference that faith makes' to the way services are delivered and experienced.

- FBOs continue to play a significant role in Britain's homelessness sector. Most basic services such as night shelters and soup runs/kitchens are provided by FBOs, and they are also major providers of specialist projects such as high support hostels.
- Specialist services provided by FBOs, such as hostels, are dominated by agencies with a Christian affiliation, while a wider range of religious groups are represented in services such as soup runs and soup kitchens.
- FBOs involved in homelessness provision have evolved to be very diverse structurally, and it is now not always easy to tell whether a project has a faith affiliation. The visibility and practice of religion in most project programmes has diminished significantly over time.
- Some FBOs actively seek opportunities to share their faith with service users, but others prohibit evangelism or proselytism of any kind. Only a small minority of service users reported that they had ever been 'bible bashed', and no publically-funded projects were targeted for criticism in this regard.
- Service users often find it difficult to discern any tangible difference in the nature or quality of faith-based and secular provision. That said, many FBOs offer an additional 'spiritual' element that is greatly valued by some.
- Some service users actively avoid FBOs, while others seek them out because they have a faith or want to explore questions of spirituality. The majority, however, are indifferent with respect to the faith affiliation of homelessness services – as long as: service receipt is not contingent on participation in religious practices (which they rarely are), and providers respect their right to desist from conversation about faith should they so wish (which virtually all do).
- Faith-based and secular providers share many core values, most notably emphases on respecting the dignity of service users, and non-discrimination on grounds such as ethnicity, sexuality, and/or religious belief. This commonality is, however, often obscured by the different vocabularies used to describe project ethos. A lack of familiarity with the terminology employed, or religious precepts referred to, sometimes leads to misunderstanding and/or mistrust of FBOs' motives.
- A significant mix of belief systems is represented amongst staff teams in both faith-based and secular services. None of the FBOs required frontline staff to profess a personal faith, but a few did require this of staff recruited to managerial positions.
- FBOs reportedly had 'further to travel' to achieve necessary quality standards under recent government funding programmes. The quality differential between faith-based and secular providers has, however, been reduced, and in many cases eliminated, by enhanced monitoring and accountability in recent years. Concerns about safety in night shelters and soup runs are still frequently expressed, but these services are increasingly implementing risk assessments and volunteer training.
- The key axis differentiating contemporary homelessness projects is not so much whether they are faith-based or secular, but rather providers' stances on service user engagement and the conditionality of service receipt. These stances range from firmly non-interventionist (with no expectation of change) to highly interventionist (with expectations regarding commitment to defined support plans). The interventionist end of this continuum is dominated by secular organisations, and while FBOs can be found throughout this spectrum, they are clustered at the non-interventionist end.

Study Background

The provision of services to homeless people is one of the longest-standing means by which faith communities have sought to contribute to the welfare of society. This study, jointly funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) reflected on 'the difference that faith makes' to the nature of service provision and how it is experienced by homeless people.

It had three main objectives:

1. to identify similarities and differences between the ethos of faith-based and secular service providers, and to explore how these shape the type and nature of interventions 'on the ground';
2. to consider the implications of the changing governance of homelessness services for faith-based provision; and
3. to examine the difference that a faith affiliation makes to the experiences and preferences of service users.

The following research methods were used:

1. Detailed case studies in London and Manchester, involving:
 - interviews with 30 managers of homelessness services (including hostels, day centres, soup runs/kitchens, street outreach teams etc.), representing 17 faith-based and eight secular organisations;
 - interviews with 35 frontline workers in these services, 22 of whom were paid staff and 13 who were volunteers;
 - interviews and focus groups with 73 people using these services; and
 - interviews with seven other key informants representing local authorities, umbrella bodies, and places of worship.
2. Interviews with five representatives of central government and national umbrella bodies, and five national faith-based welfare providers.
3. A review of existing literature and service databases.

A range of different faith groups were involved in the study, including Christian, Hare Krishna, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh.

History and Characteristics of FBOs

The vast majority of contemporary services for homeless people grew out of faith-based initiatives – most commonly beginning as soup runs or emergency night shelters. They have, however, followed very different developmental trajectories. Today, services that provide basic food, shelter, clothing and/or hospitality – such as soup kitchens, soup runs, winter shelters and some drop-ins – are predominantly run by faith-based organisations (FBOs). These tend to be small, staffed by volunteers, and resourced almost exclusively by charitable sources. High support hostels and day centres offering specialist services, on the other hand, are provided by a greater mix of faith-based and secular agencies. These offer a wider range of services, typically employ paid staff (sometimes supported by volunteers), and derive a significant proportion of their funding from statutory sources.

Of the services provided by FBOs, specialist projects such as high support hostels and day centres are dominated by Christian organisations (with many different denominational affiliations), while a wider range of religious groups are represented in the provision of projects such as soup runs and soup kitchens. Some of the latter are not targeted at homeless people specifically, but are generic community services regularly utilised by homeless people together with other vulnerable groups.

It is not possible to quantify accurately what proportion of all homelessness provision is offered by FBOs, as service directory records do not always give a definitive indication as to whether projects have a religious affiliation. Some have evolved in such a way that they are now faith-based 'in name only', and a few are 'rebranding' to disassociate themselves from former links with religious groups. It is also important to note that FBOs, and some secular projects which grew from faith initiatives, regularly emphasise or de-emphasise their project's faith affiliation/history depending upon their audience: 'playing it up' when seeking support from faith communities, and 'playing it down' when applying for public funding.

I would [normally] say that we are a charity working with homeless and vulnerably housed people, whereas if I found a trust who fund Christian priorities, I'd say we're an ecumenical Christian organisation... (Manager, faith-based day centre)

Sometimes I will say founded in [year] by [name of religious order], if I'm talking to a religious publication or doing an ad in a religious magazine or newspaper ... and there are religious trusts that we fundraise from ... But we don't highlight our religious history to the regular funders. (Paid staff, secular day centre)

FBOs are very diverse structurally, ranging in size from large international bodies such as The Salvation Army and YMCA, to very small local groups associated with a single place of worship. Their funding arrangements are likewise highly variable, depending upon the services offered. Many soup runs, night shelters and some day centre providers (faith-based and secular alike) avoid reliance on statutory sources in order to safeguard their 'independence'. Some FBOs avoid particular sources of funds such as the national lottery on moral/ethical grounds.

Quakers are generally very averse to gambling because they see it as very destructive ... The trustees have never been able to agree that we would move towards a position of getting a lottery funder... (Chief executive, FBO)

A significant mix of belief systems is present amongst staff in both faith-based and secular services. Many secular agency staff reported that their decision to work with homeless people was motivated at least in part by their faith; and most faith-based projects are staffed by a mix of people with faith, of no faith, and/or from a range of different religious backgrounds.

One of my colleagues is an Anglican priest; there's four or five Muslims; a couple of Buddhists; a lot of lapsed Catholics; a fair number of Anglicans; and a lot of people that would say they haven't got any faith. (Chief executive, FBO)

No FBO required frontline staff such as support workers to profess a personal faith – but rather simply that they be ‘in sympathy with’ project ethos (as do secular agencies). A few, however, did require this of staff recruited to managerial positions. Whilst this practice is lawful, several interviewees considered it inappropriate in services receiving public funding. Some also raised concerns about the consequent ‘glass ceiling’ for junior staff without faith.

Ethos and Evangelism

Faith is integral to the motivations underpinning FBO provision, which is regarded as an active response to teachings (shared across many religious traditions) that adherents should actively combat social injustice and care for vulnerable members of society. The visibility and practice of faith in project programmes has however declined significantly in recent years. Some of the faith-based projects had once required service users to participate in religious practices, by attending worship services for example. Such requirements had discontinued many years ago in all but one of the faith-based projects, and this was considered extremely atypical. This shift results, in part, from commissioners’ restrictions on overt expressions of religion, but also reflects a wish on the part of FBOs to avoid appearing unwelcoming to people from other faith backgrounds or of no faith.

FBOs take very different approaches to communicating their faith, if indeed they do so at all. A few of the (entirely charitably funded) FBOs were overtly evangelical, in that staff actively sought opportunities to discuss the issue of faith with service users. Other providers discouraged staff from raising the issue of religion but allowed discussion of the subject if it was brought up by a service user. Yet others actively prohibited evangelism or proselytism of any kind.

We would encourage them [volunteers] to talk about their faith, and as members of [name of church] they’ll understand that evangelism is a very fundamental part of following Jesus, we believe. (Manager, faith-based soup kitchen)

We’re definitely not an overtly Christian organisation ... I think it’s more the Catholic in Catholicism is lived, that if you believe in it let’s do something about it, rather than talk about it. So definitely in no way are we or have we ever been evangelical. We’re not here to bring people to Jesus, we don’t see that as part of our role. (Manager, faith-based day centre)

Only a very small minority of service users reported that they had ever been ‘bible bashed’ – that is, that their wish to avoid hearing or talking about religion had not been respected – by a faith-based service. No publicly-funded projects were targeted for criticism in this regard.

Service user 1: I never even knew the [name of church] soup run were a religious organisation for about a year.

Service user 2: That’s like the Sisters on a Thursday morning, isn’t it? ... They don’t even go preaching anything.

Service user 3: The Hindus ... just come up, they give you the food, they don’t even mention the word Hinduism...

Service user 4: ...*The same with the Hare Krishna. It doesn't matter if you're a Muslim, a Jew or whatever ... If you want to join, yeh, "You know where you can find us", and that's it. They're not pushing you to become one of them.* (Service users, secular day centre)

There are strong overlaps in the core values of faith-based and secular services – especially shared emphases on respecting the dignity of service users, and non-discrimination on grounds such as ethnicity, sexuality, and/or religious belief. The vocabulary used to express these values, and to describe the motivations underpinning provision, is however often very different. Many people are unfamiliar with the terminology employed, or religious precepts referred to, and this sometimes leads to misunderstanding and/or mistrust of FBOs' motives.

I used to say explicitly to faith communities ... you'll put yourself on the map better if you emphasise your commonality with the wider voluntary and community sector and its values and all the rest of it, because people will understand you, they'll know what you're talking about. Whereas, if you say "We're doing this because we love Jesus", well, okay, but you're not likely to press a lot of buttons in local authorities with that kind of vocabulary, you know. (Central Government representative)

One of the key features distinguishing faith-based from secular services is that many of the former offer a 'spiritual' element. Sometimes this comprises a formal part of the programme – via the provision of chaplaincy services, prayer, or opportunities for scriptural study for example – but often is delivered more informally. Many service users did not engage with this aspect of the service at all, but it was greatly valued by some. Faith was a key contributory factor motivating some homeless people to make positive lifestyle changes.

I had a client who ... was a drug addict, a cocaine dealer ... He ended up in the [name of faith-based hostel]. And the transformation that he's made in his life is unbelievable. He's taken up the faith and he's changed, everything has changed around him... (Paid staff, secular hostel)

Many service users were uncertain as to whether or not projects they used regularly were faith-based – commonly presuming that they 'couldn't be' if religious activities were not integral to the advertised programme and/or staff did not proactively promote their faith. Some projects offered obvious visible clues as to their faith affiliation, but even so many service users found it difficult to discern any significant difference between faith-based and secular provision.

There is no religious aspect to it [faith-based day centre] from the point of view of people that go there. They don't even say grace before the meal, but it is linked to [name of FBO] ... There's nothing – you wouldn't know that it was anything to do with the church by going there. (Service user, faith-based day centre)

Most were unable to identify systematic differences in the quality of service provided, or demeanour of staff – noting that faith-based and secular agencies were equally able to offer a warm person-centred approach.

It's hard to say whether or not there is a difference because you've got a mix of good and bad staff in both [faith-based and secular projects].
(Service user, secular hostel)

Some homeless people reported actively avoiding faith-based services due to prior negative experiences with faith groups (most commonly religious schools), or their assumptions regarding the potential risk of being 'preached at'. Others sought out FBOs because they had a faith or wanted to explore questions of spirituality. The majority, however, were indifferent with respect to the faith affiliation of homelessness services – as long as two conditions applied: first, that service receipt was not contingent on participation in religious practices (which they rarely were); and second, that providers respected their right to desist from conversation about faith should they so wish (which virtually all did).

I didn't know it was a Christian hostel, nobody told me that. But I ain't really bothered ... as long as they don't try pushing it on to me. (Service user, faith-based hostel)

Yet, service users had mixed views regarding the declining visibility of faith in FBOs. Some strongly approved of this trend, believing there to be 'no place' for religion in homelessness services; others argued that FBOs should not feel obliged to conceal their beliefs if that is what motivates them to provide what they do.

They may have reasons for not promoting it as being Christian, I don't know ... It is made known to you when you come in that it is a Christian charity, but beyond that they don't say anything else about it ... I don't see why they shouldn't promote their faith. (Service user, faith-based hostel)

Effectiveness and Inter-agency Relationships

There is a widespread agreement amongst service providers and commissioners that FBOs had 'further to travel' to achieve required quality standards when Supporting People, a funding stream for housing-related support, came into effect in 2003. The accountability and monitoring consequent of receipt of these funds has however reduced, and in many cases eliminated, any quality differential between faith-based and secular specialist provision, particularly hostels.

Faith-based organisations had further to go, to reach the grades from the QAF [Quality Assessment Framework]. But I think now it's pretty much the same across the board ... On a grand scale there's no difference, there really isn't ... because we're subjected to the same rules. (Manager, secular hostel)

I don't think there can be [differences in effectiveness] ... [If] they're contracted by local authorities, the same standards apply ... The outcome should be no different ... Often it's more down to the calibre of the staff, whether you've got a good manager, that kind of thing, than it is anything to do with faith. (Central Government representative)

That said, a few faith-based projects do have a reputation for paying staff poorly; which is said to impact negatively on the quality of staff they are able to attract and retain.

They [staff in named FBO] are very underpaid and I think they are very unmotivated. I don't think that they're given the respect that they're due as support workers, which is shown in the pay scales that they give, and I think it attracts the wrong type of worker. (Paid staff, secular hostel)

Concerns about staff and service user safety in night shelters and soup runs are still frequently expressed, but these services are increasingly implementing risk assessments and volunteer training.

There are [some FBOs] for whom it's a completely open-ended acceptance of people, almost whatever they do. So in some Christian projects you can behave incredibly badly and not be barred, that happens as well, and that's ... not very healthy ... They're not very safe for the volunteers or staff. (National umbrella organisation representative)

I cannot get my head 'round people seriously thinking that the Holy Spirit being with you could in any way substitute for a good risk assessment ... My fear is that faith groups are given more leeway to develop services without the expectation on them that they meet particular standards in terms of the way that they ... protect service users, deal with risk, all those things... (Chief executive, secular organisation)

There was widespread formal and informal joint working between FBOs, secular providers and local authorities, but little evidence of formal partnerships between groups associated with different religious traditions.

From my experience of winter shelters ... denominations work very well [together] ... They might have some quite strong theological differences, but when it comes to uniting to respond to a social need, those differences tend to be sidelined ... When it comes to working with different faiths, that doesn't happen so easily I don't think ... Groups of different faiths tend to just quietly get on and do their own thing. (National umbrella organisation representative)

The nature of relationships between FBOs and local authorities is to a large extent determined by their degree of 'fit' with central government directives and local authority strategies. These have shifted toward more 'interventionist' approaches in recent years, as evidenced, for example, by the enhanced expectation that homeless people take up the additional services on offer under the Rough Sleepers Initiative and Places of Change programme. Different stances on this issue are a major bone of contention in some localities.

The Interventionism Debate

The key axis differentiating homelessness projects was in fact not so much whether they were faith-based or secular, but rather their stance on expectations of service users and the conditionality of service receipt. Stances on this generally fall somewhere along a spectrum ranging from firmly 'non-interventionist' to highly 'interventionist' approaches. At one end, projects have an open door policy, ask few (if any) questions of service users, and hold no expectation that they should alter their lifestyle.

We don't set out to change people, for two reasons: one, because we've no right to dictate to other people how they should live their lives; and secondly on a very practical level, it doesn't work ... You can't give people that inner strength that they need to fight their addictions, they have to come to the point themselves where they decide "I want to change my life." (Manager, faith-based day centre)

At the other end, agencies more assertively encourage service users to desist from damaging behaviours and make positive lifestyle changes – sometimes making service receipt conditional upon commitment to defined support plans.

This is a place for change ... Staying the same is not an option as far as I'm concerned, I'm very strict on that ... If they're not engaging then we're all paid for nothing, and that's not on ... I will threaten eviction if necessary. I don't wanna be one of these hostels which is just all about harm minimisation. I've seen that in the past, it's pointless. (Manager, secular hostel)

The interventionist end of this spectrum is dominated by secular organisations, and while FBOs can be found throughout, they are clustered toward the non-interventionist end. Non-interventionist organisations, particularly those offering on-street food distribution, often find themselves at the centre of debates about the appropriateness of such provision – with opponents claiming it sustains street lifestyles and counteracts attempts to reduce levels of rough sleeping.

It does ameliorate the condition immediately, but it ... makes a lifestyle that's unsustainable without that sort of support, sustainable ... What encouragement is there for people to engage in mainstream community, again, if the mainstream community's happy to allow them through the churches to continue to stay where they are? (Manager, secular street outreach service)

A project's position on this continuum of approaches appeared to be the primary factor determining service user preferences. Many welcomed the proactive and intensive support offered by professionals in interventionist services. Others, including many with complex support needs and 'chaotic' lifestyles, were very resistant to such approaches – preferring what they perceived to be more 'accepting' projects.

You come here, you don't get asked any silly questions, you don't get penalised, you don't have staff on your case. You go to [name of another day centre] ... if your face doesn't fit they tell you basically to fuck off ... Here, you come in, there's no silly questions, there's no hassle, and it's all right. (Service user, secular day centre)

Several providers supported by public funding (including both faith-based and secular organisations) reported experiencing a decline in their ability to challenge government directives that they considered to conflict with their ethos, and a consequent increase in reliance on 'independent' agencies – most of whom are faith-based – to act as advocates for their clientele.

We had an issue recently where we took a neutral position and allowed others to do the speaking ... Statutory funders' trust and faith and

confidence in us helps the clients to get access to accommodation, so it's not just about money it's about relationships ... and you risk sacrificing that if you're too outspoken. (Manager, secular day centre)

Conclusion

FBOs have been key players in the provision of services to homeless people historically, and will almost certainly remain so.


The visible influence of faith on service provision has declined significantly in recent years. Most users find it difficult to discern any tangible difference in the way faith-based and secular services are run, but many FBOs offer a spiritual element that is greatly valued by some homeless people.

Faith-based and secular providers share more similarities than they hold differences, thus care should be taken to avoid exaggerating the distinctiveness of FBOs.

Equally, this evidence suggests that concerns about the propriety of supporting FBOs with public funds – given fears that they will be used inappropriately for the propagation of religion – have little foundation in the homeless sector.

Information about future publications providing more detailed analyses of the study's findings may be downloaded from <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/Projects/faith.htm> as they become available.

If you would like further information about the study, please contact Sarah Johnsen on email sj510@york.ac.uk or phone 01904 321 485.



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